

Ivan Ilyin (1883–1954)



The West exported this anti-Christian virus to Russia...Having lost our bond with God and the Christian Tradition, mankind has been morally blinded, gripped by materialism, irrationalism and nihilism...In order to overcome the global moral crisis, we have to return to eternal moral values, that is faith, love, freedom, conscience, family, motherland and nation, but above all faith and love.

Ivan Alexandrovich Ilyin (1883–1954) has in recent years become famous as a philosopher of Russian Orthodox identity. Although forbidden under the Soviet regime, his thoughts and works have come to be more and more appreciated over the last twenty years, especially since his earthly remains were re-interred in Russia in 2005. His writings are now studied in Russian schools and universities and it is possible to say that he is the favourite Russian Orthodox thinker of our times. Like all prophets, however, he was of course mainly ignored, unappreciated and even persecuted in his own times.

He was born in Moscow on 28 March 1883 into a well-educated and Orthodox family. Having shown brilliance at high school, in 1901, following in the footsteps of his father, he went on to study law at university in Moscow. He finished his studies in law and philosophy in 1906, having shown such an outstanding mind that he prepared to become a professor. In the same year, then aged 23, he married Natalia Vokach, a graduate student who was close to him in spirit. His first writings were published in 1910 and he and his wife then spent two years in Germany, Italy and France, where Ilyin studied at well-known universities and met Western philosophers of the age. Returning to Russia he taught and in 1918, received a professorship at the age of only 35.

With the Revolution of 1917, he turned from an academic into an active politician. Ilyin prophetically saw the catastrophic nature of Bolshevism, as the revolutionaries seized power six months later, in October 1917. In article after lucid article he denounced them, which led to repeated arrests and harassment by the new regime. Arrested six times in all, in 1922 he was exiled to Germany with a large group of other intellectuals, of whom Ilyin was certainly the most clear-sighted.

In exile, Ilyin continued to denounce the Bolsheviks in his speeches and writings, having seen through them in ways that few others outside the Russian Church had understood. In all his works he remained totally loyal to Orthodox Russia, despite the viciously anti-Russian regime temporarily in power. Of Orthodox Russia he wrote: 'Her blood yearns within us, grieves, it is her spirit which prays in us, sings and thinks and dreams of rebirth'. For eleven years he worked in Berlin as a professor at the Russian Scientific Institute. He kept in close contact with exiled Russians around Europe and became a leading ideologue of the future Russian national revival. In particular he was very close to the future martyr, Archbishop John (Pommer) of Riga, who, recognising his gifts as a public speaker in over 200 public lectures between 1926 and 1933, wanted to ordain him.

Moving around Germany, France, Switzerland, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Austria and Latvia, Ilyin spoke on Russian cultural, philosophical and religious themes, in Russian, French and German, and was also a member of the School of Slavonic Studies in London. One of his greatest works was on resisting evil by force, in which he opposed Tolstoy and Paris School gnostics, dreamers, philosophers and artists, like Berdyayev. His writings were published everywhere in the Russian Orthodox émigré press. In the 1930s he worked with young people and wrote extensively about Russia. Notably, his 'Three Speeches about Russia' were full of yearning, anger, pain and also his ardent faith in Orthodox Russia.

Ilyin also published in German, on themes such as, 'What is the Message of the Martyrdom of the Church in Soviet Russia for Churches in the rest of the World?' (1936), 'The Martyrdom of the Church in Russia' (1937), Christianity and Bolshevism (1937), and 'The attack on the Eastern Church' (1937). However, such writings greatly displeased Hitler, whose regime had in 1934 already dismissed Ilyin from his post for refusing to praise Fascism. Finally, in 1938 Ilyin was forced to leave Germany, his writings and speeches being forbidden by the National Socialists. With great difficulty and help from Rakhmaninov and other friends, he took refuge near Zurich in Switzerland (where, ironically, his arch-enemy Lenin had once lived in exile). In August 1934 Ilyin had already written to his friend the writer Ivan Shmeliov about his pain at feeling lonely and unneeded by his homeland. Now it was even worse.

Yet again in Switzerland Ilyin began to write and speak in public, often under pseudonyms, fulfilling his destiny, doing what God had given him life and talent to do. His work became more philosophical, more spiritual, less political, and he more and more defended family and patriotic values. After the War he published 'Axioms of Religious Experience' and three volumes of philosophical and literary prose, originally written in German. He also finished a book on Monarchy, which had been thirty years in preparation. After his death a two-volume anthology of articles published since 1948, called 'Our Tasks', was also published. This was about the future of Russia and its State, once freed of Communism. Here, one article entitled 'What the Dismemberment of Russia will do to the World' (1950) was particularly prophetic. In it he destroyed the anti-Orthodox arguments of liberal, westernised Russian dreamers, emigres like G. Fedotov.

Ilyin was never downhearted and never despaired – he was too much of an Orthodox Christian for that. His writings are full of a bright and deep faith in a better future for Russia. Writing to Fr Constantine Zaitsev in Jordanville in 1951, Ilyin eloquently and brilliantly expressed the feelings and daily realities still so very familiar to all of us Russian Orthodox in the West:

'What are we to do, squeezed between Catholics, Freemasons and Bolsheviks? I answer: Stand firm, standing up with your left hand, which goes from the heart, for Christ the Lord, for His undivided tunic, and, with your right hand, fight to the end for Orthodoxy

and Orthodox Russia. And, above all, vigilantly watch those groups which are preparing for Antichrist. All of this – even if we are threatened by apparent complete powerlessness and total solitude’.

Ilyin reposed on 21 December 1954. At his funeral Archimandrite Constantine Zaitsev said, prophetically, that Ilyin’s name would not be forgotten. Today, Ilyin is understood to be the voice of the faithful Russian emigration, a spiritual leader, a teacher, a prophet, a visionary preacher. Ilyin lived ‘only for Russia’, that is, for Orthodox Russia and her messianic calling. His prophetic insights have been justified since the fall of Communism and the huge interest in his works there now. Ilyin, who died over half a century ago, is the prophet of the new Orthodox Russia which is being born and which alone can give the contemporary world a viable future, providing that it is given time to grow to fruition in contemporary Russia.

Archpriest Andrew Phillips

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